

N
9052
N79

CORNELL
UNIVERSITY
LIBRARY



FINE ARTS LIBRARY

THE PLACE OF THE BEAUTIFUL IN THE CITY PLAN

JOHN NOLEN

Town and City Planner, Cambridge, Mass.

**NATIONAL CONFERENCE ON CITY PLANNING
1922**



Cornell University
Library

The original of this book is in
the Cornell University Library.

There are no known copyright restrictions in
the United States on the use of the text.



MUNICIPAL GROUP, SPRINGFIELD, MASS.

In so far as Springfield has brought together the elements of a group of public buildings it has secured the advantages of such action. Unfortunately the group is still incomplete and the surroundings of the municipal buildings and the beautiful Tower show many incongruous elements.

THE PLACE OF THE BEAUTIFUL IN THE CITY PLAN SOME EVERYDAY EXAMPLES

JOHN NOLEN

Town and City Planner, Cambridge, Mass.

The main conclusions at which this address aims are:

1. That American towns and cities, if they are to fulfill their purposes satisfactorily, must be beautiful.

2. That towns and cities cannot be beautiful without a city plan.

3. That the actual beauty is achieved largely through works of architecture, landscape architecture, sculpture and engineering, but in locations and under conditions that can only be made possible by a city plan.

4. That it pays to provide for the beautiful in the city plan.

What is the test of Beauty? In an address on this subject before the Phi Beta Kappa Society at Harvard University delivered a year ago, Ralph Adams Cram said, "Bring up to the Courts of Beauty any one of the things that offend us today, no matter what this may be, and abide by the verdict rendered. For the sake of impersonality let it be a modern city, anything, from Somerville to Chicago, and what has beauty to say in the premises? Before beauty's austere regard the bold pleading of business efficiency, of plausible economic law, of material progress, of a mechanistic philosophy of evolution—of Modernism, in a word—falls thin and unconvincing. Dead cities rise up before us in vision, cities now marred and degraded yet beautiful still in their delicate vestiges: Venice and Palermo, Le Puy and Carcassonne, Rothenburg and Prague, Bruges and Hil-

desheim, Oxford and Winchester—and with them beauty calls on us to match Leeds and Birmingham and Essen and Pittsburgh and St. Louis, or as a matter of fact any other city in either hemisphere created or dominated by industrial civilization. Is the change worth the price, is the criticism lightly to be cast aside as sentimental or effeminate?

“The implied condemnation is a just condemnation. Nothing can be valid that has this degree of sordid and self-satisfied ugliness. We were meant to live in beauty, to cherish it and to create it, and a civilization that functions in the hideous and uncouth is a civilization of the wrong shape, whatever the testimony of the bank and the clearing-house, and imposing statistics as to the balance of trade.”

It might as well be confessed at the start that many of those interested in city planning are afraid of the discussion of “the beautiful” in connection with the city plan. If I am not mistaken this National Conference on City Planning, now holding its fourteenth annual meeting, has so far never ventured to put upon its program any topic bearing directly upon the beauty of the city as a whole. The reasons for this fear are three. First, an unfortunate tradition from an earlier day of “The City Beautiful” which meant little more in the United States than the planting of geraniums or other almost equally superficial means of embellishment or adornment. A second reason is the belief, more widespread than it seems possible that it could be, that the beautiful is opposed to the practical and the useful, or at best is something unnecessary and extravagant. And finally, that the backing considered most indispensable for the success of city planning, namely, the so-called business interests and the men who control city governments, are either antagonistic to the beautiful in cities or at best don’t care about it. These reasons are now, I believe, without solid foundation. It can be demonstrated—in fact, I think we can demonstrate it here this eve-

ning—that there is no complete realization of what is practical in cities without due regard for design in the city plan. And furthermore, that business men, politicians, city officials and the rest of the class known as “practical men” show by their daily life in matters of food, clothing, homes and recreation, in factories, stores, hotels, clubs and their whole environment, that one of the things that they care most about and for which they work most industriously and spend money most liberally is the beautiful. Really this idea needs no further support than that involved in the phrase “If eyes were made for seeing, then beauty is its own excuse for being.”

The author of “Education and the Larger Life” has put it well in this paragraph: “We care for perfection in our ideal pursuits—in art, in literature, in music—and we admit that we care. We want the greatest possible charm and delight and beauty and excellence and power. Sculpture creates strong-limbed men and noble women and beautiful children, people of power. Architecture works for subtle proportion and fine suitableness, for the things of excellence. Painting makes permanent the magnificent color and pure line of our dreams of beauty. Literature has for its avowed purpose the production of those perfect art forms and that rich imagery and that genuine emotion which constitute human delight. And, finally, music realizes its high office in speaking most directly and most touchingly to the human spirit. Now, these are not idle words. They are not pretty playthings for the imagination to dwell upon and then pass on to the solemn affairs of trade and business. On the contrary, they represent that more permanent achievement by which the men of a later time judge whether the age has been worthy or unworthy. It is the record of the best that we have thought and done. This wealth is human. It consists of beautiful men and beautiful women and beautiful children. The practical concern of life is with human charm and human



PANORAMA OF PARIS FROM ARC DE TRIOMPHE

No better illustration than the Panorama of Paris could be found of the way in which broad city planning provides not only for convenience but also for the beautiful in the city plan. The advantages and attractions of right location and arrangement are everywhere evident in this illustration of the great ground plan of Paris.



BASIN OF APOLLO, VERSAILLES

A good formal vista carried out with perfection, except, perhaps, the elevation of the Palace itself, which some critics consider squatty.

delight and human beauty and human excellence and human power."

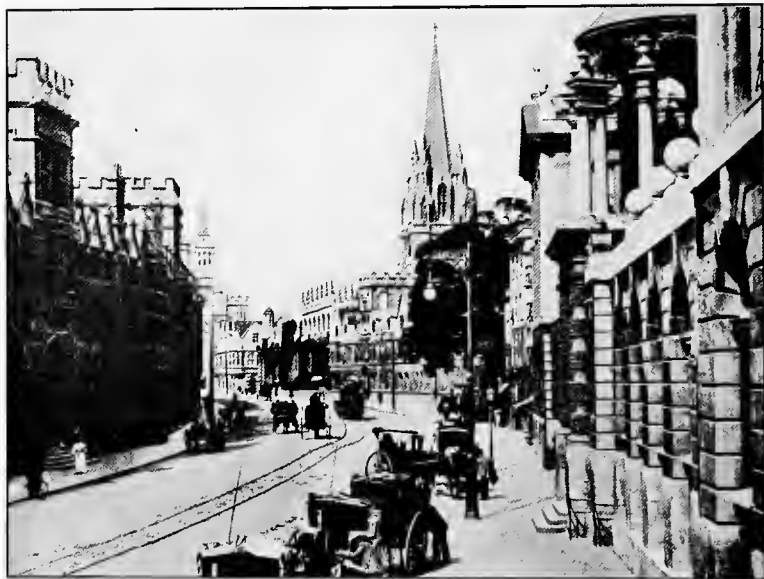
Underlying the question of this evening's discussion, namely, "The Place of the Beautiful in the City Plan," is the broader question of the place of the beautiful in the city. No one doubts seriously that things of beauty have a place in towns and cities. For example, there is first of all what may be termed the natural beauty of cities,—their rivers, lakes, ocean fronts, their hills and mountains, their fields and marshes, their high places with commanding views of various types of outdoor scenery, their woods and vegetation. Cities quite generally secure these natural features and conserve them, primarily because they are beautiful. It is true that such lands and outlooks contribute to the health and active or quiet recreation, and are in some instances directly useful; as, for example, river valleys in connection with the surface drainage problems of cities and the regions surrounding cities. But the expense of acquiring these natural features and their maintenance, and their interference with other municipal requirements, are only justified by the contribution which these natural features make to the beauty of the city, and the opportunities they afford to enjoy that beauty.

Then, there is the beauty created by the works of man. Of course, the beautiful in the parks and open spaces and even in the wild reservations of cities is largely the work of man, too, and represents design and intention and skill of a high order on the part of landscape architects. For convenience in discussion, however, natural forms of beauty may be classed separately from buildings and architecture of various kinds, such as city halls, libraries, schools and other public buildings or private buildings for all the purposes of business, industry and residence, as well as bridges, viaducts, monuments, etc. Here again no one seriously questions that these buildings and other constructions should be beautiful. The only inquiry to be made is the



L'AVENUE DE L'OPERA, PARIS

A splendid example of the formal vista logically and beautifully executed. Although American cities are usually laid out with straight streets they generally lack a good terminal treatment of such streets. Washington, D. C. is an exception. New York, on the other hand, is a city with many long, straight, wide streets, with scarcely any good vistas in a city planning sense.



HIGH STREET, OXFORD

One of the very best examples of curved streets affording convenience and beauty and informal vistas. The composition is constantly changing as one progresses along the street.

form of expression that the aesthetic element should appropriately take. Then, if we consider monuments, memorials, sculpture, etc., it becomes even more evident that the beautiful not only has a place in such works of civic art, but, like the parks and natural features, it is the main purpose and justification.

But parks and open spaces, city halls, libraries, schools and other public buildings, also private buildings for residences, business and industry, and all the other constructions that might readily be named, are not the city plan. They may exist without any city plan, if by city plan we mean a deliberate design and arrangement of the city as a whole, or a redesign of the same. As a matter of fact, in American cities these various constructions do usually exist without any real city plan, and it may be added that notwithstanding the merit and beauty of many of these constructions architecturally, considered one by one, American cities, as cities, are almost invariably ugly.

What, then, is "The Place of the Beautiful in the City Plan?" Or, as the subject was first stated by the Committee, the achievement of beauty through the technique of city planning? The answer, it seems to me, is quite simple. It is the city plan that makes the beautiful in cities possible. Except as a diagram may be considered interesting or beautiful, looked at as a design on paper, or as the city plan as a whole might appear beautiful because of its recognizable order and symmetry and logically good arrangement as viewed from an airplane, the city plan in itself is not beautiful at all. Nevertheless it is the city plan, and the city plan alone that makes the beautiful in cities possible. This is repeated, for it is the crux of the whole matter. I venture boldly to assert that there can be no such thing as a beautiful city without a city plan conceived and executed not only so as to serve all the practical requirements of a city, but also to provide abundant opportunities for the proper expression of the beautiful. It is true that the

beautiful in cities comes actually through the works of landscape architecture, architecture, sculpture and engineering, but the point of greatest importance to note is that the city plan provides the location and arrangement, the elevation or gradient, the foreground and background, the vistas, balance and symmetry, the street scenes; it provides a proper sense of scale, the broad relationships, the environment, and the opportunity for the grouping, assembling and composition of such works under conditions that make them truly and permanently beautiful.

"In paying tribute to the architect," wrote W. Hamilton Gibson years ago in praising the Chicago Exhibition, "we perhaps unconsciously credited him with more than his due; certainly more than he would himself claim. Of what avail were beautiful palaces if they could not be seen; and how easily might such an assemblage of heroic structures such as these at Jackson Park (as in previous similar expositions) have been so disposed, with relation to each other and their environment, as to have completely lost not only their individual impressiveness but the infinite advantage of their imposing ensemble.

"We traverse the winding lagoon for an hour in continual delight, every passing moment, every quiet turn of our launch or gondola beneath arching bridge or jutting revetment opening up in either direction new and ravishing vistas of architectural beauty. Yet how little have we considered that the very means of our enjoyment, the pure blue water-way upon which our gondola so listlessly floats, is the crowning artifice by which the work of the architect is glorified—a very triumph and inspiration in the great scheme of landscape gardening, which has made this Columbian Fair a unique model for all others of its kind. I think it is conceded by the architects of the Fair that in no way are its buildings to be seen to such satisfaction or full effect as from the lagoon. And it is well to remember, if only as an instructive object les-

son, as we glide upon this liquid street, how much of our present enjoyment is due to the forethought of a supreme design, which, even before a single foundation wall was laid, had taken into account the most effective grouping of the architectural features." And as we may have works of engineering, architecture and landscape architecture that are beautiful in themselves and not have a beautiful city, so we may have a skillful city plan that will meet all the requirements, practical and aesthetic, of a city plan as such, and yet not have a beautiful city, because of the failure of the various arts and professions named to create constructions of beauty in the places and under the conditions which the city plan provides. In other words, the beautiful in cities is dependent upon the city planner to meet the full requirements of a city plan, including the opportunity for sculptors, architects, landscape architects, engineers and others to carry out their constructions so that they are not only useful and beautiful in themselves, but also so that they contribute toward the total beauty, the ensemble, which it is the intention of the city plan to create.

The criticism that is usually associated with aesthetics in connection with city planning has, as a matter of fact, nothing whatever to do with city planning. This point of view is indicated by such ideas as pink bows on lamp posts. It is usually associated with the more superficial elements and excrescences of architecture, engineering, street furnishing, gardening, etc. Again let me repeat, this criticism has nothing whatever to do with "The Place of the Beautiful in the City Plan." In so far as it is valid at all, it applies only to the various minor constructions and decorations of cities. Of course these various works and constructions should have their own appropriate appearance and beauty, and should be designed in good taste for their various purposes. But in any case they are not the city plan, and ordinarily do not have anything to do with the planning part of building cities.



AIRPLANE VIEW OF MANHATTAN ISLAND, N. Y.

This remarkable picture is an extremely valuable illustration of the disadvantages that result from the type of gridiron plan which New York represents. As Mr. Elihu Root said in a recent address, "Did it ever occur to you that in the city of New York we never approach anything that is beautiful and noble? We are always going by such things."

Sir Henry Wotton in his "Elements of Architecture" says, "Well-building hath three conditions: commodity, firmness and delight." From this phrase of an English humanist a theory of architecture or of city planning may be profitably discussed. Architecture requires firmness. By this necessity it stands related to science and to the standards of science. Architecture also requires commodity. It is not enough that it should possess its own internal coherence. It has come into existence to satisfy an external human need. It is subservient to the general uses of mankind. It is social in its service. And, finally, architecture requires delight. For this reason, interwoven with practical needs and their mechanical solution, we may trace in architecture a third and different factor—the desire for beauty. No better expression of the same idea applied to city planning has yet been made than that of Frederick Law Olmsted in his introductory address on city planning at the National Conference on City Planning twelve years ago, in which he says: "The demands of beauty are in large measure identical with those of efficiency and economy, and differ merely in demanding a closer approach to practical perfection in the adaptation of means to ends than is required to meet the merely economic standard. So far as the demands of beauty can be distinguished from those of economy, the kind of beauty most to be sought in the planning of cities is that which results from seizing instinctively with a keen and sensitive appreciation the limitless opportunities which present themselves, in the course of the most rigorously practical solution of any problem, for a choice between decisions of substantially equal economic merit but of widely differing aesthetic quality."

At a meeting held less than a month ago publicly to inaugurate under the auspices of the Sage Foundation the "Plan for New York and its Environs," the Honorable Elihu Root said many significant things about city plan-

ning, from which now only one striking arraignment of New York's gridiron of streets can be given.

"Did it ever occur to you that in the City of New York we never approach anything that is beautiful and noble? We are always going by such things. There are many great and noble buildings, noble works of art, but we are always passing by them. You have to turn your head to see them. In the one city of America that had a plan, in the city for which Washington secured the advantage of that sense of design in which the French are so superior, in the person of L'Enfant, wherever you go you have before your eyes something noble and beautiful. Here (in New York) the fine things are by-products, they are sideshows.

"I hope for our city in the future that the immense increment to human happiness, which comes from the cultivation of tastes, may be gratified and nourished by laying before the people, always, objects that are noble and beautiful, that will ennoble and beautify character, so that the people of this great city will contribute to the character of America not weakness, but strength and vigor."

Does it pay to provide opportunity for the beautiful when making a plan for a new town or city, or in replanning an old one? Such provision costs nothing, unless it can be shown that the services of a more skillful planner cost more than a less skillful one. In any case, a city plan that has a right regard for design and composition and for the location of streets and buildings and open spaces is certain to result not only in an increase of both convenience and beauty in cities, but also in the creation of property values that fully justify the beautiful from a purely economic and financial point of view.

In conclusion we come again to what is perhaps the most difficult phase of a complete city planning program. It is to form public opinion and to get action on the beautiful in city planning, as with other phases of the subject. That there is skill enough to produce a city plan giving oppor-

tunity for the right location, grouping and assembling of streets, open spaces, parks and buildings has been demonstrated by the expositions held within the last thirty years in this country, notably the World's Exposition at Chicago in 1893 and the San Diego Exposition in 1915. If the people of our cities could be made to understand that in city planning they are dealing with the same type of practical idea only on a larger scale, they would follow it to the end. In discussing this very matter Vachel Lindsay has vividly presented in his new volume on "The Art of the Moving Picture" the new agency that we now have at our service to carry out a much greater program than hitherto would have been possible. He says, "Here we have this great instrument, the motion picture, the fourth largest industry in the United States, attended daily by ten million people, and in ten days by a hundred million, capable of interpreting the largest conceivable ideas that come within the range of the plastic arts and yet those ideas have not been supplied. It is still the plaything of newly rich vaudeville managers. The nation goes daily to the movies, through intrinsic interest in the device, and is dosed with such continued stories as the Adventures of Kathlyn, What Happened to Mary, and the Million Dollar Mystery, stretched on through reel after reel, week after week. Kathlyn had no especial adventures. Nothing in particular happened to Mary. The Million Dollar Mystery was: why did the millionaires who owned such a magnificent instrument descend to such silliness and impose it on the people? Why cannot our weekly story henceforth be some great plan that is being worked out, whose history will delight us?"

The great material projects are often easier to realize than the little moral reforms. Beautiful architectural undertakings, while appearing to be material, and succeeding by the laws of American enterprise, bring with them the healing hand of beauty. Beauty is not directly pious, but it does more civilizing in its proper hour than many sermons or laws."



ELEVATED RAILWAY, BERLIN

Proper scale in a city plan provides not only the necessary convenience but also a place for the beautiful. Contrast, for instance, the appearance as shown above of a street in Berlin of adequate width, carrying elevated railway structure, and a street in New York City or Chicago. Most American cities have inadequate street widths not only for traffic purposes but for a proper treatment of the street from the point of view of appearance also.

"Is there a reform worth while" says this man of vision, "that cannot be embodied and enforced by a builder's invention? A mere city plan, carried out, may bring about more salutary economic change than all the debating and voting imaginable. So without too much theorizing, why not erect our new America and move into it?"

May I repeat as conclusions the statement with which we began:

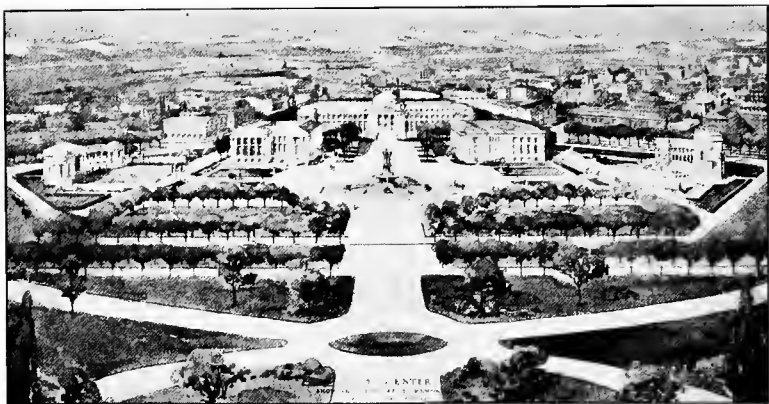
1. That American towns and cities, if they are to fulfill their purposes satisfactorily, must be beautiful. The city itself should be a work of art.

2. That towns and cities cannot be beautiful without a city plan.

3. That the actual beauty is achieved largely through works of architecture, landscape architecture, sculpture and engineering but in locations and under conditions that can only be made possible by a city plan.

4. That it pays to provide for the beautiful in the city plan.

Finally, we must recognize that most of us live in ugly cities, and there is little or no need for it. The question is not one of optimism or pessimism, but of honestly facing facts. True, we must be practical and look after the utilitarian needs of modern city life. That, however, does not involve a neglect of the beautiful. You may remember the phrase of the old Bishop in "Les Miserables," "The beautiful is as useful as the useful," adding, "and perhaps more so." In our city planning we must provide for people, and if we are to successfully provide for people we must think of their happiness, and if they are to be happy, the beautiful must be included in any complete program. Such a program calls for the transformation so far as that is possible through the replanning of existing cities, but the program should also include the building of new cities on new lines, free from the hampering conditions that are characteristic of old cities. How entrancing



CIVIC CENTER, DENVER, COLORADO

Denver has one of the most complete and most beautiful civic centers in the United States, and illustrates both the practical and aesthetic advantages of the grouping of public buildings.

is this prospect! To have any part in a broad city planning program is to have an enviable life, giving opportunity for genuine and permanent public service.

The best method of demonstrating the Place of the Beautiful in the City Plan is by means of illustrations. Arrangements were therefore made to have some sixty-seven lantern slides shown with this object in view, classifying them so as to show that it is the city plan that provides the location and arrangement, the elevation, the gradient, the foreground, the background, the vistas, either formal or informal, the street scenes, a proper sense of scale and the broad relationships of one part with another; in fact, the whole environment and the opportunity for the grouping, assembling and composition of public works under conditions that make them truly and permanently beautiful.

A list of the lantern slides follows, and a few selections are here reproduced.

I. Location and Arrangement

Panorama of Paris from Arc de Triomphe

Airplane view of Manhattan, New York

Plan of Champs Elysees, Paris

L'Enfant's Plan of Washington, D. C.

Map of San Francisco

Plan of Williamsburg, Va.

Street Arrangements—Good and Bad

Metropolitan Park System Diagram, Boston

The Muddy River Parkway, Boston

Waterfront View, Dusseldorf, Germany

Waterfront View, Haverhill, Mass.

Waterfront View, La Crosse, Wis.

The Elbe River, Dresden

Airplane View of San Diego, Calif. Showing Waterfront

The Erie Canal, Schenectady, N. Y.

Clare College, Cambridge, England

Sherwood Forest, England
Grandad Bluff and Coulee—La Crosse, Wis.

II. Street Intersections

General Sketch Plan of Street Intersections
Airplane View, Piazza del Popolo, Rome
Piazza del Popolo, Rome (two views)
Main and Pleasant Streets, Worcester, Mass.
Post Platz, Dresden

III. Foregrounds

Plaza and Union Station, Washington, D. C.
Pennsylvania Railroad Station, New York City
Airplane View, Place de la Concorde, Paris
Open Space, Munich
Maximillian Strasse, Munich
General City Plan, Munich

IV. Background

On the Way to the Botanical Gardens, Rio de Janeiro
Avenida Central, Rio de Janeiro
Theresian Strasse, Innsbruck
Meiringen, Switzerland

V. Vistas (formal)

Airplane View, Opera House, Paris
L'Avenue de l'Opera, Paris
Airplane View, Washington, D. C.
Street View of Washington, D. C.
Post Office, Chicago
Court House in a Southern City
City Hall Vista, Boston
Airplane View, Back Bay, Boston
Strassburg Cathedral
Amsterdam Canal
Street Arcades, Paris
Basin of Apollo, Versailles
Section of New York City
Wall Street Showing Trinity Church Vista, New
York City

VI. Vistas (informal)

High Street, Oxford, England
Magdalen Tower, Oxford, England
Roadside Cottage, Grasmere, England
Brattle Street, Cambridge, Mass.
Street View, Forest Hills Gardens, Long Island

VII. Scale

State Street, Madison, Wis. (two views)
Elevated Railway, Berlin
The Bowery, New York City
Bulow Strasse, Berlin

VIII. Grouping of Buildings

The Municipal Tower, Springfield, Mass.
Civic Center, Denver, Colo.
Part of City Map, Springfield, Mass.
Connecticut River Bridge, Hartford, Conn.
Plan for Civic Center, Little Rock, Ark.
Bird's Eye View, San Diego Exposition

IX. Conclusion

General Plan, Mariemont, Cincinnati, Ohio
The Borough of Dunmore, Scranton, Pa.
Town Center, Mariemont, Cincinnati
General Plan for Replanning Flint, Mich.
Lagoon—Chicago Exposition, 1893

NA 9052.N79



3 1924 014 930 261

fine

JUN 14 1998		
OCT 12 1996		
Library Loan		
AUG 15 2001		
GAYLORD		PRINTED IN U.S.A.

GAYLORD

PRINTED IN U.S.A.

